



Education...A Challenge, A Choice

This week I proposed a balanced budget that protects public education, launches an aggressive job-creation initiative and expands services for disabled Kansans-all without a tax increase. But, I also challenged the 2004 Legislature to look beyond my basic budget and consider a plan to maintain the quality of Kansas's schools.

Of course, it would be easy for me to propose budgets that don't require sacrifices or hard decisions, but it would fail to address the important issues that will determine our future, and our children's future. Doing that would be following the path of least resistance and least reward, failing to fulfill our responsibility to provide the best for our children and grandchildren.

In talking with the thousands of Kansans who participated in my Education Task Force Forums, they told me that maintaining and improving the quality of Kansas schools is the most important thing that we can do for this state and its future. Business leaders told me that good schools are the key to maintaining the quality of life, essential to attracting jobs, and new business opportunities to the state.

The Education First Plan I announced in my State of the State address would provide local districts with an additional \$300 million over the next three years to increase teachers' salaries, expand early learning programs including all day kindergarten, and help the increasing number of at-risk students who are struggling to learn basic reading and math skills. The plan also includes a proposal to conduct efficiency audits of local school districts; to ensure that the bulk of the money they receive is going to classroom instruction and not to sustain layers of bureaucracy.

For too long, we have treated education and the economy as separate issues. But the world economy and the Kansas economy have changed. For our economy to grow, every worker in this state, from the scientist to the schoolteacher to the worker on the assembly line, must have 21st Century skills. No plan to revitalize our economy and create jobs can be complete unless it strengthens our schools.

I have given the Legislature a choice. They can pass the basic, no-tax-increase budget and risk the future of our schools. Or, they can join me in providing the leadership required to ensure long-term prosperity for our state. I call on all Kansans to join me as we pursue a new goal for our state: that our schools are the best in the nation a decade from now. If we do anything less, we will fail our children and our children's children and the Kansas leaders yet to come.